

Anthony Giddens and public relations: A third way perspective

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Abstract

In the article, the main theories of Anthony Giddens (structuration and late modernity theory) are presented and applied upon public relations. A review shows that there have been few attempts to use these theories in public relations. The analysis states that using Giddens leads to a questioning of the dichotomy between instrumental agency-oriented theories that neglects power structures as well as critical theories that only views public relations as hidden strategic action used by elites to dominate the public sphere. The conclusion is that there are two major arguments for applying Giddens to public relations: (1) the theory of late modernity may enhance our understanding of public relations as an evolving practice in socio-historical and spatial terms; (2) the structuration theory enhances the holistic understanding of how public relations communication, interpreted as a process, may be used both as a reproductive and a transforming social instrument. Giddens theory may in other words be used as a “third way public relations theory”.

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1. Introduction

There have been few attempts to use Giddens’ ideas in public relations theory and practice. A review of public relations research that has used Giddens theories gave few results. In organizational communication the situation is similar (e.g., Yates & Orlokowski, 1992). Considering the common critique in contemporary research that public relations has been dominated by mainstream and ethnocentric US-biased perspectives (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2004; Vercic, van Ruler, & Flodin, 2001), it is interesting to see that the main contributors to a Giddensian PR theory are Cozier and Witmer (e.g., 2001) from the US. This article is partly based upon ideas and research made by Cozier and Witmer.

The lack of Giddens in public relations is strange since, which I aim to show in this article, there are good reasons for viewing his theories of structuration and late modernity as relevant tools for understanding why public relations have developed, and how it may be developed as an instrumental society-centric and public-oriented practice. In this article I will shortly introduce some of Giddens main concepts and perspectives and then apply them upon public relations.

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2. Giddens—an introduction

Anthony Giddens is renowned for two major theoretical systems of ideas: the structuration theory (1984) and the theory of late modernity and reflexivity (1990; 1991). In later years he has written about third way politics (Giddens, 1998a) and globalization (2002).

Giddens work is based upon a critique of three established traditions of sociology as well as the three ‘founding fathers’, Durkheim, Weber and Marx (1979). The aim is to transgress the division between objectivism and subjectivism as well as between agency and structure. Giddens is obviously not alone in his division critique, which is shared also by several other social theorists. According to Giddens, structuralism, functionalism and systems theory lack theories of the subject and agency, even though they have some sound analysis of structural relations and systems. On the other hand side, interpretative and agency-based ideas of thought lack theories that show the relations between the subject and social structures. The strength of these interpretative theories is that they focus upon human reflexivity and relative freedom to act. Marxism is interpreted as having the best solution of the dichotomy between structure and agency but is based upon an idea of determinism and evolution and has low value in contemporary society. All together the critique of functionalism and structuralism has had certain effects on later writings by Giddens. There is an increasing emphasis on the possibilities of conscious human agents to transcend structures. From a public relations point of view, one may say that Giddens questions instrumental agency-oriented theories that neglects power structures as well as critical theories that only views public relations as hidden strategic action used by elites to dominate the public sphere (Habermas, 1991).

To handle the theoretical problems, Giddens draws on a time-space-dimension that supports a dynamic and optimistic view upon macro- and micro-social changes. The spatial perspective in Giddens theory is of special interest to communication research as a whole, based on the notion that all forms of communication occur in space and that all spaces are produced through representations, which occur by means of communication (Falkheimer & Jansson, 2006).

There are several critical readings of Giddens. As an example, Brante (1989) concludes that Giddens argumentation vulgarizes the basic questions since it is superficial, too wide and simple. One of the mistakes that Giddens does, according to Brante (1989, p. 61, my translation), is that he reads the sociologists too narrow. “He is scared that structuralists do not understand that it is living human beings that produces as well as reproduces structures; that functionalists and evolutionists use concepts such as ‘need’ and ‘social adaption’ not metaphorically but actually believe that societies are biological organisms with these qualities”. Another mistake, according to Brante, is the all-embracing approach. Giddens cannot accept that some aspects or social dimensions are not included, which makes him juggling with too many balls at the same time.

3. Structuration theory

Giddens critique and synthesis of the old classics is developed into a new theory—the structuration theory. This is done in a very complex way by using a spatial and temporal dimension in social analysis. The structuration theory does not focus on the individual actor or societal totality “but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). In fact, one of Giddens main argument towards traditional social theory is that it does not position social institutions, structures and agents in space and time. Space and time are basic conditions for social systems and social acts. The dualism between structure and agency is replaced with a relational approach, which makes it very relevant to public relations. Social structures are reproduced or transformed through repetition (on a macro-level) of individual acts. The conclusion is pragmatic: yes, there are social structures (traditions, institutions, rituals) but they are made by humans and may be replaced and changed through time and space. Social structures are medium of human agency as well as the result of this agency. It is an optimistic social theory that focuses social praxis. Later I intend to focus upon this praxis as a mode of communication (Fig. 1).

Social systems range from dyads to global formations (Giddens, 1979). Structuration processes is based on the condition that the development of these systems are open-ended. There are, as in Marxist thought or functionalist thought, no historical or functional structures that define the future. The structuration processes may lead to reproduction of existing structures as well as radical change. From an organizational perspective the theory is a sharp critique of the modernist notion of organizations as containers in which the organizational agents function and interact with each other and with agents outside the organization. There are here possible links between structuration theory and the epistemology of social constructionism that offers a shift from a focus on stable organization structures to ever-changing

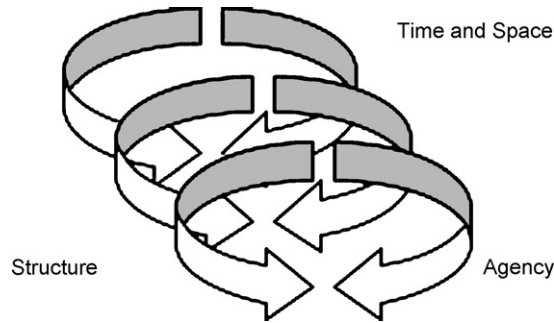


Fig. 1. Structuration theory: the relational development.

open-ended processes (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). There are interesting links to the theories of Berger and Luckmann (1966), that states that societies and organizations are human constructs which, when they are institutionalized, are strategically objectified by agents trying to legitimize their status' and positions.

4. Late modernity

Giddens' analysis of modernity is framed by the notion that that we are living in a rapidly changing world. In one of his later texts (2002), Giddens concludes that: "There are good, objective reasons to believe that we are living through a major period of historical transition. Moreover, the changes affecting us are not confined to any one area of the globe, but stretch almost everywhere" (p. 1). Giddens theory on historical transition differs from the postmodernists (e.g., Lyotard, 1986), since it does not view the social change as a total shift in time. From a postmodern perspective the modernity is over-turned by a new social and cultural order in conflict with modern institutions and rational reason. The ideas of a coherent History, linear Progress and systematic and objective Knowledge are viewed as social constructs with limited value. From a Giddensian perspective modernity is not at all overruled. Instead, we are living in a time where modernity has radicalized. In other words: the social characteristics of late or high modernity have been there since centuries but have now become more radical and global than ever.

Giddens (1990, p. 53) points towards three interdependent sources of the modernity dynamic: (1) the separation of time and space; (2) the development of disembedding mechanisms; (3) the reflexive appropriation of knowledge. The escalating separation of time and space has led to a higher speed of change (compared to pre-modern societies), expanding scope and the growth of new modern institutions. All together, this has led to an increase in risk apprehension and uncertainty. Risk is distinguished into two types. First, external risk that are experienced as coming from the outside and are related to nature (e.g., floods or plagues). Second, manufactured risks that "refers to risks situations which we have very little historical experience of confronting" (Giddens, 2002, p. 26), such as those connected to the globalization (global warming) but also those connected to humans everyday life (e.g., traveling subway). In the same way as Ulrich Beck, the author of *Risk Society* (1992), Giddens bases his risk analysis from the perspective of a reflexive self, a late modern human that has to make more and more choices.

The amount of objective risks is not the issue here, but the feeling among people that every step in life is related to different risk scenarios. "Living in a secular risk culture is inherently unsettling, and feelings of anxiety may become particularly pronounced during episodes which have a fateful quality (Giddens, 1991, p. 182).

The increasing emancipation from old traditions and hierarchies has created a new lifestyle—"life politics" (Giddens, 1991, p. 214). The authorities in late modern societies are, according to Giddens, as well as Beck, challenged. As an example, scientists are losing their status. The scientific rationality has caused the risk society. The difference between Beck and Giddens appears when one asks how societies should handle and manage the risks. Giddens believes that it is important to re-shape the trust in science, while Beck wants the expert systems to be democratized. Giddens (1998b) points towards mass media spin, threats to the societal economy and industrial scandals as reasons behind the decreasing trust. He proposes a strategy for creating new trust, e.g., by learning scientists to communicate to the public. The analysis of risk, uncertainty and reflexivity is of high importance to public relations. In late modernity the development leads to new relations between organizations, society and the public concerning trust and legitimacy.

Giddens' concept disembedding is used to describe how local social relations are restructured in unlimited spaces (in contrast to traditional and firm relations in pre-modern societies). The reason behind this process is the separation between space and place. Giddens uses two types of disembedding: symbolic tokens and expert systems. The symbolic tokens are "media of interchange which can be 'passed around' without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture" (Giddens, 1991, p. 22). His example is money and money transaction. Expert systems are "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments that we live in today" (Giddens, 1991, p. 27). A technical example could be computer support. But the social expert systems are probably the most prevalent, especially with regard to the mass media trends where instructive and therapeutic shows dominate contemporary television (e.g., *Dr. Phil*, *Nanny* 911). Public relations is also a typical late modern expert system, which I will later discuss.

5. Public relations and structuration theory

Structuration theory challenges the modernist notion of organizations and society as two different stable systems as well as the division into internal and external communication. The systems perspective analyses organizations as organisms and "(...) assumes that the survival of an organization is enhanced or constrained by consequences of the actions of its conflicting or relevant publics" (Cozier & Witmer, 2003, p. 4). Public relations then become a response system, an organizational subsystem (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), especially used towards conflicting publics.

Structuration theory is not in total opposition with the systems perspective, but has closer links to constructionist, cultural and critical perspectives. One first difference is that structuration describes rather than prescribes the role of public relations. A second difference is that the theory does not view organizations as stable, rather as dynamic and transforming. The organizational as well as societal structures are produced and reproduced by the members of the organization through communication (cf. Shotter, 1993). The dualism between structure and agency is replaced with a relational approach that gives public relations a vivid role. "From a structurationist perspective, public relations is a communicative force in society that serves to reproduce and/or transform an organization's dominant ideology, rather than solely adapting to a stakeholder group or public" (Cozier & Witmer, 2003, p. 16). A third difference is the focus on spatial and temporal contexts. The spatial (place) and temporal (time) dimensions in public relations theory are rather neglected. In the last decade there has been an increasing focus on international public relations but this has mostly meant national comparisons (e.g., van Ruler & Vercic, 2004).

Giddens' stress on spatial dimensions is of a complex nature, focusing local as well as regional spaces (in everyday life). The temporal dimension is in the same way directed towards micro-time rather than macro-time.

Cozier and Witmer (2003) have constructed several presuppositions for a structurationist public relations perspective, that I support, but have transformed and limited down to three. A structuration perspective means that:

- (1) The public relations core are communication processes that are dynamic, ideological, temporal and spatial. There is a link to the ritual model of communication, focusing communication as sense-making rituals in contrast with the modernist transmission model (Carey, 1988). The focus is shared meanings and sense making: organizational members mutually construct a social reality. In a methodological sense this presupposition is an argument for more ethnographic and qualitative research. In an applied sense it may be a support of a community-based approach through storytelling and rituals and an increasing support of informal communication systems.
- (2) Public relations is not a subsystem performed by public relations professionals, but by all members of the organization. "This means that the analysis needs to move away from roles and address the involvement of all organizational members in the enactment of ongoing public relations communication" (Cozier & Witmer, 2003, p. 23). In applied terms, this would mean that public relations is viewed more as a support process in the field, integrating all levels of the organization (such as the service encounters) than an isolated top management function.
- (3) Public relations needs to be analyzed as an ideological communication force that may have quite different outcomes. In the age of life politics, structuration theory supports the perspective on public relations as an important practice and profession that may lead to reproduction of social structures as well as emancipation and transformation.

All together, my interpretation is that structuration theory has advantages as well as disadvantages when it comes to public relations. A sceptic, and I would not totally disagree, would say that the structuration theory describes something simple in a very complicated way.

That public relations is a communicative structuration force, transgressing the constructed borders in and between organizations and society, that either may reproduce or transform social structures is not really a surprise for most PR researchers or professionals. On the other hand side, structuration theory could be valuable as one part of a constructionist and communicative turn in public relations theoretical development. Drawing on interpretative, critical as well as systems theory it advances the foundation and challenges modernist assumptions (e.g., between organizations and society, internal and external communication, public relations professionals and organizational members).

6. Public relations in late modernity

The theory on late modernity is obviously connected to the structuration theory but also stands for itself. From a public relations perspective it gives an opportunity to leave the organizational framework of analysis and try to interpret public relations as a force in a rapidly changing society. In fact, it is possible to interpret public relations as one of the main strategies that different institutions and organizations implement trying to handle and manage this development. The core issues of the late modernity, earlier discussed, are also the core issues of public relations—risk, uncertainty, trust and holistic reflexivity. From a professional standpoint Giddens' late modernity theory may gain a societal understanding of the practice and its consequences. This may lead to a higher state of *reflexivity* (about the social context, ethics and social responsibility). Reflexivity as a concept may also be used to argue for the role of public relations as an “interpretative” or “reflexive” profession, not only a work of transmission messages to publics. Below I will try to show the relations between late modernity and public relations regarding three main trends: the division between space and place, disembedding processes and reflexivity.

When it comes to the spatial and temporal dimensions (e.g., globalization), the development of media and communication technologies have gradually challenged the time and space borders. This has gained the development of new symbolic spaces between humans, groups and societies. Public relations may be viewed as a strategy and tool used for controlling, listening and influencing these symbolic spaces. Historically, the main interest has been in formal symbolic spaces (e.g., news media) but the late modern development has created new, often informal, symbolic spaces that public relations now struggle with (e.g., blogs, e-mail-lists). Also, in modernity organizations have mainly related to national political and cultural contexts. But in late modernity these borders are transgressed and transnational publics, groups or issues demand a multicultural and global approach.

When Giddens (1990) points towards the space and time compression as one of the central features of late modernity, he also concludes that this becomes a separation between what is seen and not seen. In a public relations context this separation is certainly important. Relations between what is formally communicated at the organizational front-stage (in public) and what is happening back-stage (in the organization) are complicated. In fact, the bad reputation of public relations has evolved from the public notion that the practice only concerns the front-stage, trying to hide what happens behind. Despite exceptions and theoretical developments, one may presume that the majority of real-life public relations only work with front-stage and visual management in different symbolic spaces. All together, the increasing separation between place and space and importance of informal symbolic spaces are some of the reasons behind the expansion of public relations practice.

The second main trend of late modernity, processes of disembedding, are according to Giddens (1990) defined as “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (p. 21). From a public relations perspective, the disembedding processes of late modernity are also main reasons for the evolvement of the practice. This is so because disembedding lead – beside symbolic spaces, which are mentioned earlier – to an increase of uncertainty and a need of systems that create trust and legitimacy. The knowledge specialization in all parts of society and the development of “manufactured risks,” are putting people in tough situations where they have to make new choices all the time. Technical expert systems as well as service expert systems are there to help us. But from a holistic perspective, focusing relations between organizations and society, public relations could be interpreted as the main expert system of creating trust and legitimacy.

The third trend has been mentioned earlier, reflexivity. In the analysis on reflexivity Giddens leaves the macro-level and tries to understand everyday human life from a social psychological point of view. The concept focus on the continuous human process of reflecting upon how we act and what we think, a process that has evolved gradually in modernity. It is rooted in individualism, de-traditionalization and the informationalization of society: we know more about the social life, have less ‘old’ traditions and institutions to lean towards and are forced to make individual choices all the time. This reflexivity may lead to different outcomes. In a debate book Giddens (2002, p. xiii) writes about how

the de-traditionalization and radical changes have led to an increase in religious, nationalist or ethnic fundamentalism. Fundamentalists react towards threats to traditions and “to the fundamentalists, there is only one right and proper way of life, and everyone else had better get out of the way”. From a public relations perspective, the discussion on reflexivity is important since it concerns the sense-making processes of the public. In functionalist and mass-oriented theory the public, publics or organizational members are usually not given active roles: they are receivers of messages which they may like or dislike. Viewing organizational members and the public as reflexive agents gains an understanding of the relational aspects of public relations.

7. Conclusions—towards a third way public relations perspective

There are both advantages and disadvantages with using the theories of Giddens to analyze public relations. The main advantage is that such an analysis may contribute to the understanding of public relations as a late modern societal phenomenon in relation to different political, economical and cultural institutions. The structuration theory may be used as a tool for developing new theory that transgress’ traditional divisions and borders. Together with interpretative and critical theory it may give new insights. I especially find the late modernity theory relevant for a macro-analysis of public relations as a reflexive and social expert system, in a dialectic relationship to societies norms and values. In an applied sense Giddensian theory could be used to develop more dynamic and public-oriented strategies, focusing the public from a multicultural and reflexive view and challenging borders between constructed systems and subsystems. I find two main disadvantages of using Giddens in public relations theory. First, that it – even though theoretically discussed – lacks in empirical grounding. Researching public relations practice from a structuration perspective probably soon becomes complicated. Applying late modernity theory may not be very much easier. Second, the dynamic, relational and eclectic character of Giddens theory makes it so wide that it may be used in all fields of social and cultural science in several ways. On the other hand side, this may also be a sign of its true interdisciplinary and grand scope.

To sum up, according to my interpretation there are two main argument for using Giddens theories in public relations: (1) the theory of late modernity may enhance our understanding of public relations as an evolving practice in socio-historical terms; (2) the structuration theory challenges the mass- and systems-oriented paradigm in public relations theory and enhances the holistic understanding of how public relations communication may be used both as a reproductive and a transforming social instrument. Giddens’ theory may in other words be used as a “third way public relations perspective”: between managerial, functionalistic and prescriptive traditions and critical and interpretative approaches. A further development of a third way theory would lead to an increased focus on public relations everyday practice as situational, spatial and temporal. It would also lead to an increased interest in the qualitative dynamics of reflexivity processes in different publics, based on a social constructionist approach to practice and reality. In empirical terms this would motivate ethnographic research. From an applied perspective the third way theory may be used to develop dynamic and process-oriented communication strategies from a society-centric and public-oriented perspective.

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